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Retired Army colonel named Teacher of Year

WASHINGTON (AP) --President Bush on Wednesday praised a retired Army colonel who made education a second career and became the 2002 teacher of the year.

"He has served both the children and the country well," Bush said in a Rose Garden ceremony for Chauncey Veatch, a social studies teacher at Coachella Valley High School in Thermal, California.

For 50 years, presidents have honored teachers of the year as a way to promote the profession and to highlight their own commitment to education.

"Teachers are indispensable," Bush said before handing the award to Veatch. "We ask a lot from them and teachers are right to expect a lot from us."

Veatch, 54, will be freed from classroom duties for a year to spread the word. He succeeds Michele Forman of Middlebury, Vermont, the 2001 teacher of the year.

"If you'd like to be a part of America's tomorrows become a teacher today," Veatch said with Bush at his side. He also spoke in Spanish.

Troops to teaching

A native of Kansas who spent his early years mostly in southern California, Veatch spent 22 years in the Army infantry and medical services corps, working as a medical administrator.

After retiring in 1995, Veatch was curious about teaching, so a few days before the beginning of the school year, he called up the local school district in Thermal, California, looking for a substitute teaching job. Though he had no teaching experience, the district offered Veatch his own classroom, teaching eighth-grade science and math.

In the beginning, he looked to his brother and sister, then both teachers, for guidance. Veatch spent the next three years taking classes at night, on weekends and in the summer to earn the required credentials to stay in the classroom.

Growing up in a military family, Veatch remembers moving around a lot -- in fifth grade alone he attended five schools in four states. Many of his students are from families of migrant farm workers tending and picking grapes near Bakersfield and Fresno. Veatch is fluent in Spanish.

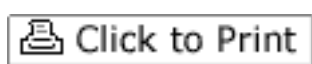
Bush has championed the Troops to Teachers program, which matches retired military personnel with public schools. Already, Veatch said, he has received e-mails and letters from other retired soldiers, about a dozen of whom have asked about careers in teaching.

The teacher of the year program, sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers and Scholastic Inc., the educational publisher, named its first winner in 1952. Colleagues generally nominate teachers for the state-level award. The winner's home state and district ensure salary and benefits during the year away from the classroom.

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